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UNCLAS TEGUCIGALPA 002751

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/PDA (OHILTON), WHA/CEN, AND INL/LP

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON DRUGS, NOVEMBER 20, 2003

1. Op-ed by Ramon Villeda Bermudez (current Liberal Party Congressman) in Tegucigalpa-based liberal daily "La Tribuna" on 11/20 entitled "A hundred tons of cocaine ". "The U.S. Ambassador Larry Palmer recently revealed that almost a hundred tons of cocaine go through Honduras and Central America on its way to the U.S every year. This shocking figure means that the drug seizures done by our security forces have gotten only an insignificant amount of the drugs transported through our country. This announcement came just a few days after our security forces presented the data of drug seizures for this year, which we had seen as a huge success."

"The first question that came to my mind was, how did those figures, which are a matter of concern to the Ambassador, his and our government, and all decent Hondurans, came to the attention of the Ambassador? I'd also like to know: if the U.S. knew this all along, how come the powerful northern country hasn't done anything to stop it?."

"Honduras has repeatedly explained to the Americans that, although the government has increased the amount of drug seizures and has improved our mechanisms to arrest drug traffickers, we have insufficient means to improve our results in this fight. We have repeatedly said to them that we can't use our entire limited budget to build a fence to protect the back of a rich neighbor that has all the necessary means to build it by itself."

"The Honduran request for more economic aid, equipment and five helicopters to increase our effectiveness in our fight against drug trafficking is widely known internationally. Our governmental authorities talked about this issue when the Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Honduras, although I believe Powell didn't like this idea that much."

"The Ambassador of the most powerful country in the world has mentioned a list of requests from the Bush administration to Honduras, which include the reforms of our legal system to increase our effectiveness in the fight against narcotrafficking."

"It's a national shame that some of the narcotraffickers we have arrested, just a few days later have escaped from prison. It's also a shame that some of the cocaine seized by the police has been later sold by the same police officers who seized it, as it happened recently in Choluteca. Maybe Colin Powell was thinking about these facts when he said that we must fight corruption in a more decisive and effective manner."

"There are a hundred million reasons to seriously think about what Ambassador Palmer has recently said, and there's also a hundred million motives for Honduras to get the assistance we need from the U.S."

Palmer